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ABSTRACT

This digest describes the creation and operation of after school programs for poor urban students. Schools often sponsor such programs and find the advantages to be the credibility lent by the school, continuity of care, and easy access to resources. Some of the disadvantages to school sponsorship are higher personnel costs, the possibility of budget cuts, and the perception by students that the program is merely an extension of the school day. Many community and religious organizations also sponsor after school programs. The usual goals of these programs, which attempt to be fun, challenging, and comforting, are: (1) psychosocial development; (2) education; (3) recreation; and (4) career awareness. Considerations of student recruitment, parent participation, and community involvement must be factored into program planning. Effective recruitment and use of program staff and program evaluation are additional aspects program planners must consider. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

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AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR URBAN YOUTH

The number of children and adolescents without family supervision after school is increasing. Further, the once common notion that self-care led to greater maturity has been replaced with the knowledge that many "latchkey" children, home alone after school, may experience loneliness, fear, and worry. They also risk injury, victimization, bad nutrition, and the negative impact of excessive television viewing. Adolescents who care for younger siblings may experience great stress and must forgo constructive after-school activities. Those who "hang out" with similarly aimless friends may join gangs or engage in premature sexual activity, drug and alcohol use, and other anti-social behavior. Idle youth are particularly prone to many negative influences in urban areas (Marx, 1989).

Because studies show benefits for poor urban students who engage in planned after-school activities (Posner & Vandell, 1994), a large number of such programs have been implemented. They range from small projects with a single purpose, such as raising reading scores, to well-funded comprehensive programs. Over three million children participate in some type of after-school program (National Study, 1993). This digest describes the creation and operation of the larger and more structured programs, but community groups that want to initiate small projects can incorporate relevant ideas and experiences into their own designs.

Program Sponsorship

Schools frequently sponsor after-school programs since many districts, public agencies, or legislation require it. The advantages of school sponsorship include credibility, a continuity of care, and easy access to good resources. Also, programs in schools eliminate the need for children to travel to get to them, and parents do not have to go to two locations to participate in their children's education. The disadvantages include higher personnel costs if after-school staff salaries must be equal to teachers', unexpected program cuts if the after-school program budget is tied to that of the school, and a perception by children that the program is merely an extension of the school day (*Latchkey Guidelines*, 1987).

Many community and religious organizations, either profit-making or non-profit, are also qualified to manage programs. Some operate independently, while others have a service contract with the local school district. A potential difficulty for non-school sponsors is the availability of a well-equipped site that is an easy commute from school and home. Ideally, the site has both educational and recreational resources, sufficient rest rooms, and a kitchen. Independent after-school programs sometimes rent school space since schools have the best facilities. Thus, they have some of the same advantages as a school-operated program.

Programs can either be self-supporting through tuition paid by participants (possibly on a sliding scale); supported by grants and contracts; or funded through a combination of both. In urban areas families usually pay nothing or only a very small fee.

Many Federal and local government agencies offer funding for after-school programs. For example, government anti-crime programs support afternoon anti-gang activities and special education programs support remedial education. It may be possible to combine special purpose funds from several agencies to create a full-service program. Some foundations also fund programs. Local businesses and organizations may contribute, possibly with in-kind gifts, such as sports equipment or even a site (Carnegie Council, 1994).

Program Design and Goals

Overall, after-school programs strive to be fun, challenging, and comforting. They are freer than schools to use innovative curricula and activities to promote children's learning. They can be flexible in tailoring children's time to their needs, have a better student/staff ratio, and benefit from multi-age groupings.

Specific goals and activities vary, but, in general, most programs have the following goals (*Latchkey Guidelines*, 1987; Marx, 1989; Brooks & Herman, 1991; *What Adolescents Want*, 1992; Carnegie Council, 1994; Morton-Young, 1995):

Psychosocial Development

- To make available responsible and caring adults who offer support and guidance.
- To foster the self-worth of each child and develop their self-care skills. For adolescents, to foster an age-appropriate sense of independence, and develop the ability to resist participation in premature sexual activity, substance use, and anti-social behavior.
- To develop the youth's personal and interpersonal social skills, and to promote appreciation of cultural diversity.

Education

- To reinforce school day learning by integrating personalized educational supports into each child's schedule.
- To provide time and space for quiet study.
- To provide educational enrichment activities and to spark youths' curiosity and love of learning.

Recreation

- To provide recreational and physical activities to develop physical skills and to constructively channel energy pent up after a day sitting in a classroom.
- To encourage participation in sports activities to help youth develop self-esteem and learn lessons about cooperation and conflict resolution.

Career Awareness

- To provide age-appropriate job readiness training.
- To provide information about career and career training options, preferably through firsthand experiences with community business leaders and tours of local businesses.

Student Recruitment

Schools and districts that run an after-school program inform parents about it in the same way as they provide other information. Independent programs often forge a partnership with the district to promote recruitment. Letters, flyers, and announcements in local newspapers are simple recruitment tools. Materials can be supplied to local employers for dissemination; doing this may also spark program support.

Personal contact with parents is a more effective strategy, however. Some programs designate a staff member to serve as a "community representative" to speak personally to families about the importance of after-school activities (Brooks & Herman, 1991). Religious leaders, physicians, and social service workers can also inform parents about programs.

Programs frequently recruit adolescents directly. Many urban youth are anxious to have a safe place to go where they will receive personal attention. They are likely to respond to the lure of good sports equipment and challenging recreational and educational activities (*What Young Adolescents Want*, 1992).

Parent Participation

Parent involvement in after-school programs is important. Even before they enroll their children, parents are asked what they want their children to learn, and what their children like to do (*Kids' Time*, 1994). After the children begin attending, staff tries to meet regularly with families, personally and in meetings. Staff helps parents develop learning activities for their children at home, provides information on parenting issues, and reinforces parents' experiences with their children's school (Morton-Young, 1995). Also, communicating with parents of diverse backgrounds about their children's needs, and their child-rearing methods and expectations for their children, can prevent conflicts. It can also help staff better appreciate diversity.

Community Involvement

Since the entire community feels the impact of youth self-care, establishing an advisory council that includes local leaders is useful. Council members with relevant skills can provide services the program would otherwise have to pay for: specialists in child development, curriculum, public relations, and fund raising (Morton-Young, 1995). Community members can also serve as tutors, mentors, and speakers for special programs. Links with public health and social service agencies facilitate parents' use of them (*Kids' Time*, 1994).

Program Staff

Each program usually has at least one director and several counselors. The optimal staff/student ratio is 1 counselor to 10 to 15 children. Staff can consist of credentialed teachers, school aides, college students, and community members. Some funders require staff to be certified by a state agency and to have completed special courses in child development, school-age care, or recreation. Bilingual staff can be helpful. Other desirable staff qualities include the following (*Kids' Time*, 1994; Carnegie Council, 1994; *What Adolescents Want*, 1992):

- Strong interpersonal, communication, and organizational skills.
- Respect for and enjoyment of children.
- Appreciation of children's individual needs, differences, and diversity.
- Experience working with children the age of the participants.
- Punctuality, reliability, patience, and flexibility.
- A positive and optimistic outlook.

Most programs provide initial staff training that covers the developmental needs of children at different ages, cultural sensitivity, creation and oversight of activities, and effective communication with parents. Programs also supply ongoing feedback, evaluation, and support (*Kids' Time*, 1994).

Program Evaluation

A recent national survey of after-school programs indicates that participants and their families are generally happy with them, but that the key criterion for satisfaction is simply their existence; parents are relieved that their children have a safe place to go after school. As yet, no systematic evaluation has been made of the impact of after-school programs on children in general (*National Study*, 1993), although studies of their impact on poor children have shown positive effects (Posner & Vandell, 1994).

Developing a mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness of a program will help ensure that children are benefiting and that improvements are made. Indeed, some funders require evaluation. Statistical components include enrollment, attendance, and drop-out rates. Another useful evaluation mechanism is a review of individual participants' performance and group experiences. Student portfolios, containing, for example, photographs, artwork, and writings, can provide information about each child's progress over time. Joint review of these materials by staff, families, and the participants themselves can enhance the children's self-esteem and allow for self-evaluation. Yet to be assessed, but important nevertheless, is the "prevention function" of the program: does it prevent low self-esteem, gang involvement, and school failure (*National Study*, 1993)? Finally, the participants themselves can be asked how the program can be made more fun, since the better time they have the more they will learn.

— Wendy Schwartz

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